

Comment: Kazak Electoral Reform Debased

Author: [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Much-vaunted electoral reform is less than it seems, as it will do little to shake the hierarchy of local government.

Kazakhstan's local government reform comes into force this year with the first direct elections of administrators. But while the change – replacing appointed officials with elected ones – is of course a welcome development, the mechanism by which it will work is, on closer examination, flawed to the point of uselessness.

The constraints placed on the democratic process are likely to mean that local government chiefs continue to exercise immense executive power without accountability to the public or to elected local councils. That breeds corruption, nepotism and other abuses of power.

The timing of the first round of elections was announced on March 11 by the head of the Central Electoral Commission, Zagipa Balieva. The reform had been discussed for almost five years, but the decision to move ahead with it came in a decree issued by President Nursultan Nazarbaev in December 2004.

The August 2005 ballot will see elections of akims - governors or local government chiefs - for villages and small rural areas.

As a pilot experiment, there will also be a limited number of elections of akims at the next higher level, the district. At the bigger provincial level, the governors will continue to be appointed from above.

These elections are being given much play by the authorities, who are keen to demonstrate a commitment to greater democracy. And they certainly have to be an improvement on the current system, where President Nazarbaev appoints the provincial governors and the mayors of big cities, and they, in turn, pick the district chiefs below them, and so on down the line.

But on closer examination, the way the elections are being organised is likely to perpetuate the defects of the existing system rather than improving on it significantly.

In reality, only villages with a population of under 5,000 will hold truly direct elections.

In areas where the population is bigger, the elections will be indirect, using the electoral college system. Under that system, the people picked to choose the akim will be elected by the community, but because the vote will be by an open show of hands, it is doubtful that people will dare go against the trend – or against instructions.

That will make it fairly easy for a powerful local figure who wants to become akim to get his own people voted onto the electoral college.

A second important point is that August is just the start of the process: the numerous elections of low-level akims – and there are nearly 2,500 of them – will be spread over a three-year period, diluting the effect of this exercise in democratisation.

It is not clear how many district akims will be elected this year. They too will be elected indirectly, in this case by the provincial assemblies. Even under the new rules their superiors, the regional governors, will still have the right to nominate them. In a political system where such advice from superiors tends to be followed, the results will be predictable.

Finally, perhaps the gravest flaw in the scheme is that there is no constitutional or legal mechanism to distinguish them from their appointed colleagues. What that means is that elected or not, the akims will still be answerable to their superiors according to the existing hierarchical framework. Nor is there any law that forces them to be accountable to the voters.

One positive innovation is that the lowest tier of akims may be able to exercise more power. An early pilot scheme run in 1999-2001, in which just 29 villages elected akims, was less successful than it might have been partly because once in power, the officials did not have a budget to spend. This time round, they should benefit from ongoing government work devolving certain executive powers to lower-tier institutions and giving them separate budgets.

Last June, President Nazarbaev spoke of the akim elections as an important area of political reform. And few would doubt that if officials receive their mandate more or less directly from the people, they will do a better job - if only to stand a chance of re-election.

But as things stands, it is hard to see the limited and low-level democracy that is being put in place as something that will radically change Kazakhstan's politics.

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